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Oral History: Aubrey H. Liles Jr. - Company Clerk in the Korean War

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Student Interviewer's Name: Ally Stock

Interviewee's Name: Aubrey H. Liles Jr.

Time and Location of Interview:

This interview was covered in one meeting for around 35 minutes on October 26, 2016. The interview was held in Thatcher Hall at Southern Adventist University in a private area so it would not be interrupted.

About Aubrey H. Liles Jr.:

Aubrey H. Liles Jr. was born in Birmingham, Alabama. He attended Southern Adventist University to get a degree in Business Administration. In 1952, Liles Jr. was drafted into the army becoming a company clerk where he never left the states. He has three children: two daughters and one son. He recently moved to Ooltewah, Tennessee to be closer to his family. This interview covered a variety of topics including: his duties as a company clerk, his religious affiliations, and what his life consisted of during the war.

Interviewer: Ally Stock (AS)

Interviewee: Aubrey H. Liles Jr. (AHL)

AS: Are you ready to start this interview? I have to record it.

AHL: (chuckles) Please excuse my southern accent.

AS: What time period did you serve in?

AHL: Mmhm. That was in the... eh... probably forty-nine to fifty-two or three. It ended in fifty-two. I went in in fifty-two and the war ended while I was still in. It was still going while I was there but it ended.

AS: You said that you graduated from Southern Adventist University?

AHL: Yes I did. I started in 1947.

AS: What did you graduate with?

AHL: Business... Business Administration and I... Uh... I married a girl that was a student here. She's from Knoxville and in the year... I think it was forty-nine... She left around December to go home and I left at December to go home to get ready for the big wedding in August. We were married in forty-nine and I got out in fifty-two and the Army had deferred me for being a student. I got my draft in August as soon as I got out and I went in October of fifty-two.

AS: Before you were drafted, where were you living?

AHL: I was living in... Uh... Birmingham, Alabama.

AS: Whenever you were first drafted, what were you thinking?

AHL: You could imagine I had just married and I knew where most men were sent. Immediately, they were sent to Korea 'cause there was a big war going on there. I was afraid that was going to happen to me but hey, I was lucky. You know, I stayed on this side of the ocean for the whole two years.

AS: How did you get to stay within the States?

AHL: I guess being a good soldier. (Chuckles) No... One morning... Every morning they have a roll call in the Army... really early... 6 o'clock in the morning. The Sargent made a call and he says is there anybody that is a good typist in this army here, in this company. You were told never to volunteer for anything because if you did they would put you in KP (kitchen patrol) or something. I said, I'm gonna tell this guy that I can type and I'm a good typist. I went up to him after the roll call and I said, Sargent you're talking to one of the best typists in the army right now. He grabbed me by the arm and said you common' follow me. We went down to the company. Every company has an office and there's an officer in there and there's a Sargent. There's an enlistment man that keeps track of all the men that are in that company. When they come in they keep track of 'em, and when they leave they type up all kind of reports and send them to the department of our army. To make a long story short, the company clerk that was in there kept making mistakes on morning reports. Every morning, they would have to type up a report and he'd make mistakes. Instead of typing it again, he would just exit and put the right letter beside it and it was messy. Well the company commander, when he saw that he had to initial it. It went to the battalion office. He had to initial it. Everybody had to initial the mistake that company clerk made in typing. He made a lot of them. He was just not a good typist so they put me in as a company clerk. I was a trainee. I ended up training in that company and eventually was assigned to it as a permanent member of the company and I stayed in that same company for two years doing nothing but being the company clerk. We moved the company in Virginia, which was close to Richmond and we moved it close to San Antonio in Texas.

AS: So the entire time you were in either San Antonio or Virginia?

AHL: Mmhm... Mmhm... A company was trained for four months. I went in, I was what you call a trainee and that means that everyday you get up and march and you're very restricted. You're afraid to turn your head because it may be the wrong way or something. Anyway, I got of a lot of that because I was elected the company clerk.

AS: What was your experience like in training?

AHL: Well, I was still in training and one of the worst things in training was what they called the obstacle course. We had a big ole muddy field, it's raining and they're gonna make it muddy. They had logs in there and they make you, on your belly, crawl across this wet, loblolly of logs and mud and then they've got ammunition up to a certain height so if you raised your head to try to get up you could get shot. This is training and believe me everyone was digging holes because they weren't gonna get their heads shot off. But anyway, it was muddy and if you've never been exposed to it. You were with lieutenants and other officers and they were all doing it together. You had to do it every once in awhile to be sure you hadn't forgot how to do this type of thing. So anyway, I was sure I wasn't shot but I remember kicking an officer behind me and I was nothing but a trainee. You're nothing. A trainee is worse than garbage. But anyway, I got through all of that in the company and it was just like a job I went to everyday. I was typing as the company clerk and the company commander was my boss. I got along fine. I was happy that I had that job because a lot of buddies I had were over there in Korea cause that's where they sent all of 'em. There was a big war going on over there and that's where I would've gone but I was lucky enough to get involved in that to save me from having to go to Korea which I didn't want. I was just married for a year or so. Didn't appeal to me at all as you can imagine.

AS: Where you able to keep in contact with your wife while you were working?

AHL: Oh yeah, we lived on the post. I had a trailer. I bought a house trailer, a twenty-four foot house trailer. I bought it when I was in Virginia and when I was transferred, I pulled it behind my car across the states to San Antonio. We... uh... found a trailer park real close to the post and I had a friend who had a trailer also and he was able to get in there in that same park. We had a good time because, you know, it was just like a job to me then. I would get through at five or six and come home and eat with my wife. On weekends, we'd have friends and we'd do things... and ya know, it was like a job. I was always, you know, I went as high as a corporal. When you go in, you're nothing. When you get through basic training for four months, then you become what they call an E1 private. You don't even get a stripe for it, you just are not a trainee anymore. So after awhile if you behave yourself and are a pretty good soldier, they'll give ya...err.... they'll rank you as a private. You get one stripe on your sleeve. As you stay in and keep out of trouble, the next rank is corporal and that's where I got. That's as high as I ever ranked. That's where I was when I was discharged, a corporal... And you might want, I don't know... Adventists, ya know, they were rated as 1-A-O. In other words, they were selected to be in the army and had a job but not a rifle. Most Adventists were Corpsmen or Aidmen. In other words, they were right on the front lines and it was a dangerous job. If another soldier was wounded right in front of ya and the bullets all around ya, it was up to you to get him to safety. Uh, so... It was not a... uh... some people looked at it like... a lot of Adventists were on battlefields and in trouble as far as the battle goes. I was really lucky.

AS: Did you not have to work any Saturdays?

AHL: Nope, the first Sabbath I was in there, I had my physical. They called me to Birmingham but I lived in Chattanooga. My wife worked at TVA and I just got out of school and I worked at company too here in Chattanooga. We lived in Collegedale right up Camp Road here... so... I just rode a bus to Birmingham to be inducted with my physical. You just don't know how bad that was. It was just a big ole' airport that they converted into an army facility and you were running around there with mostly no clothes on and getting shots and doctors looking at you. I had a buddy that was being looked at at the same time I was. I got through and they put me on a bus, that same day. I was headed for South Carolina, Fort Jackson. That was where they were gonna send me to camp to be indoctrinated to get a haircut, you get your hair cut off. (Chuckles) I was looking forward to having a friend with me but right as I was about to leave, he came up to me and he says Aubrey they say I've got a bad knee. I'm not going in. So I took awhile to... ugh... I was just about ready to die... Anyways, I went by myself to Fort Jackson and on the first Sabbath, I went in to see the company commander and I went in and I told him, ya know, I'm a Seventh day Adventist. He said, Listen boy, we know about you, and we've never had any trouble with Seventh day Adventists. Don't you worry about a thing.

AS: So they seemed to be really understanding with your religious stance?

AHL: Well he said, but I got in and let me tell you, it was just like any other day. First thing they did was send me to a barber to get my hair cut off. I had to pay for that. You know, at home, you wouldn't do that on the Sabbath. I began to think, hey something's not right with what he told me. Anyway, I finished that Sabbath day training, listening to the articles of war and the discussions. Finally about 4 o'clock that afternoon, I had just all that I could take. I said to myself, I'm not going to take anymore training today, so I just left. It was a company of one hundred and twenty five men and I'm one of 'em. They were minus one. I just went out and I found me a place in a field under a tree and I went out and I'm not being smart about this but I just prayed. I felt bad, I felt that I hadn't kept the Sabbath and all this and that. I didn't know what was gonna happen to me because every class they took a roll call. They knew I was missing. I didn't know what they'd do to me because I had missed several hours of training. I just, you know, said heck with it. I don't care, do what you want to me. I got a haircut and all that little stuff. Anyway, I survived that day... and there was no problem at all. I'm sure the Lord helped me because I was expecting something bad because I was just a number... When you're in the Army, you're just a number. Anyway, I never heard a thing from it and I was transferred that same week. I was transferred from Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which is in Columbia up to Camp Pickett, Virginia which is right outside of Richmond. I was on a bus just by myself going up there and that's where I was going to take my basic training. The other stuff was just indoctrination into the army and then training where you get up at an ungodly hour and get up and march and listen to all these reports of the articles of war and you know, everything. I was in that by myself but this boy that had the knee injury, he came in about 3 months after I did. Evidently, they got it treated so they could accept him. He eventually ended up at the same

camp I was and he had a trailer right across the street from us, my wife and I. So we had friends... It was like college. We'd be in the army 'til like four or five and then I'd get in my car and I'd go to my trailer. I'd eat with my wife and we had this friend that we could go out and do some things with. Life was good, from that point on. We had our first baby at Fort Sam Houston and my wife, this was our first child. This was a big deal for us.

AS: Did your wife have a doctor from the Army?

AHL: Yes and we just... uh... didn't know what to expect because being a Southern girl, you're not used to having a black doctor. If you're in the army, if you're a doctor, it didn't matter what color you were. It didn't bother me but I knew how she felt about it, going through stuff while you're pregnant being looked at from a doctor from head to toe. So anyway, we had our first child there and she's now 61 years old now. Her name is Sandy. Joni was the next one and she was born when I was out of the service.

AS: Did you ever witness any racism towards the doctor or other soldiers in the war?

AHL: Well, you know, I just tried to keep my head down and not cause any problems. It was just a way of life, you know. Nothing knew.

AS: Let's go back to when you were talking about being Adventist in the war. Did you ever hear about Project Whitecoat?

AHL: Yep, sure did. I had a lot of friends that went to Washington and they were involved with being the guinea pigs for all kinds of stuff. I didn't have that option. If I did, I probably would have done it. It was, you know, you were basically at Walter Reed Hospital in the camp there and you were involved with, I guess, different things to see if it's something you need to get a shot of medicine for. Every boy that was in the service didn't get that option. If I did, I would've taken it.

AS: What was your stance on the war? How did you feel about it? Because you were placed within the United States, did it almost become a nonchalant thing that you just heard about?

AHL: Well, I got to feeling like they were my enemy. North Korea had done a lot of things that shouldn't have been done. They treated South Korea badly, that's why we were in it. We were trying to be friends with the people that they were so ugly with... Killing them... I think our country, more or less, solidified that thing and made it so they were at peace with each other, North and South Korea, until now. Now you can read a lot about North Korea now, they're still a pain. No telling what the future will bring with them.

AS: How did the war affect your life?

AHL: It made me so glad that it was behind me. Sometimes now I think it would've been nice if I would've just stayed cause I could've had a chance to be an officer. I was a college graduate and I passed certain exams when I was getting ready and all I had to do was enlist for the next three years and if I would've said... well I was in for two years... so if I took the third year they would've sent me to an officer school. No telling what I'd be cause I could've left the Army a captain or a major... I don't know... at least a lieutenant and at least a general... It was all kind of in between. Lieutenant and captain... majors and you know, it goes on up. You know, I was glad it was over with and I just went on with life as best as I could. My wife is a good piano player and everywhere we went she was involved with music in the churches. At Camp Pickett there was a town called Black Stone, Virginia. Most of the members there were service men.

AS: You said you lived in a trailer for a while? Why was that?

AHL: The reason we got a trailer is cause you couldn't find housing that weren't rat infested, bugs. These people in Virginia were very country people, you know, and if they had a place it was either very nice and someone was already in it... or if you could find a place, you knew why there was nobody in it.

AS: A lot of gross conditions?

AHL: Yup and so we never even tried to rent a place cause we couldn't find... my wife was very particular anyway, which I'm glad. So we had a friend that had a trailer and he got us a trailer. It was pretty nice because you could make your own meals and I pulled it myself in my own car from Richmond area, Virginia all the way to San Antonio. That's where I was discharged from. I pulled the trailer back to Birmingham and I sold it there. That was the end of my trailer life. It served a great purpose cause we were able to... Even though it was very small, like when we had our first child, Sandy. People came because they all had to come out there and see that baby. But where in the world were they all going to stay? We could keep maybe one or two. Finally my wife's mother came and we could take care of her. We made room for her. We had a couch that we could make a bed out of. The front of it was a kitchen with a stove and a table that you could eat on. That was it.

AS: While you were working, were you involved with any drama within the base that had to do with your religion?

AHL: No, I was just there to do my job of typing and it was a lot of typing. I remember I'd get down to the bottom of a sheet and if I made a mistake, I jerked that sheet out, tear it up and start all over again.

AS: You had to do the whole page over again?

AHL: I didn't have to but I did. I didn't want them to kick me out or give them a reason to get mad at me.

AS: When you volunteered, were you already a good typist?

AHL: Well, you know, when I was in school for Business Administration. I had to know how to use all of the office equipment. One class I had, I remember I had to take typing and I was a good typist.

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